

## GANNETT NEWS SERVICE

Obey: Congressional year was neither defeat nor victory

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WASHINGTON -- As chairman of the powerful House Appropriations Committee, Rep. Dave Obey said he spent much of this year "in the center of a firestorm" as Democrats tried to force the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq and spend more on domestic programs.

Obey, D-Wausau, became chairman in January when Democrats reclaimed the House after 12 years in the minority. He and Sen. Robert Byrd, the new chairman of the Senate Appropriations Committee, went to work immediately to complete the 2007 budget the outgoing Republican majority had left unfinished.

When Democrats turned to writing their own 2008 budget, they clashed with President Bush.

In May, Bush vetoed a war supplemental bill Obey helped craft because it had troop withdrawal provisions. In November, the president vetoed the 2008 spending bill for the Labor and Health and Human Services departments that contained money for social service programs Obey has long championed.

In the end, Bush will get \$70 billion for Iraq and Afghanistan combat operations unfettered by any timetable for troop withdrawals. But Democrats will get some of the additional money they sought by shifting funding from administration-favored programs and declaring some items emergency spending and not subject to regular budget rules.

All of it is folded into one \$555 billion spending bill to fund much of the federal government.

"We have made significant changes in the president's priorities," Obey said, citing an additional \$3.7 billion for veterans' health care as an example.

But the changes are not as sweeping as Obey had sought.

"That's not nearly enough to meet the long-term needs of the country and we won't be able to change that until we have a president with a different set of priorities and until we elect more progressives to the Senate," Obey said.

Obey, a House veteran of 38 years, said he wouldn't concede defeat on Iraq or claim victory on domestic issues.

"I don't look at this as win-lose. I think that's Little League stuff," he said.

Brian Riedl, a federal budget expert at the conservative Heritage Foundation, said, "The omnibus has been portrayed as a defeat for Democrats (because) on the surface, it appears the president got his spending level.

"(But) the Democrats got \$20 billion in emergency spending and through (budget) gimmicks."

Riedl, an Appleton native, chided Republicans who frequently challenged Obey and other Democrats on local funding projects known as earmarks but objected when Obey proposed eliminating all earmarks to reach Bush's budget target.

Obey and congressional Democrats will face just as many challenges next year as they try to set federal spending priorities. Obey said he's not sure what course he will try to take.

Since 2008 is a presidential election year, Obey said Democrats might use a stopgap bill in the fall to fund the federal government through what they hope is the swearing-in of a Democratic president.

"The president has clearly indicated he has no intention whatsoever of compromising," Obey said. "We could live with a continuing resolution for 90 days until we got a president who behaved like an adult."

But that's the next battle.

A tired Obey joked that mostly he wants to sleep over the next week or so.

"I'm going to climb into bed on Dec. 26 and not get out until the first," Obey said.

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